

historical and cultural context

The territory which eventually became the state of Montana was part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the land which Napoleon of France sold to the United States of America to boost France's depleted reserves. By the 1870s cattle ranchers had joined miners and trappers in settling the remote region but the population still numbered only 21 000. Although gold discoveries drew prospectors to the fields, permanent population growth was slow. Even today, although Montana is the fourth largest state, it has one of the smallest populations.

In the 1860s the Indian Wars were fought between the Europeans and the Sioux and Cheyenne nations. In 1876 the Sioux and Cheyenne people defeated General George Custer's army but the struggle to keep their lands ended when the Nez Percé nation surrendered in 1877. Montana became a US state in 1889.

By 1948, the time the novel is set, the United States had been involved in two world wars. World War II veterans returned from Europe and the Pacific to a home state untouched physically by the war. Although Bantrock men suffered no fatalities on active service, there were some like Harold Branch who "came back without his legs" (p. 37) and, no doubt, many who still bore the emotional scars of the fierce Pacific battles. They came home to what David describes as "a new, blessedly peaceful era" (p. 16), a time when people were still grateful for peace, before America became involved in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

focus questions

- Locate the state of Montana on a map of the United States of America and note the isolation of the north-east corner of the state where the fictional town of Bantrock is located in the novel.
- Consult an encyclopedia reference to Montana for a brief history of the state, noting its "Wild West" background and the fate of native Americans.

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chapter summaries and key quotations

prologue

The narrator, David Hayden, commences his recollection with potent images from his twelfth year. He recalls the final illness of the young Sioux woman, his father's pleas for help and another mind picture of his mother awkwardly wielding a shotgun. These and other images, smells and sounds haunt him until forty years later when his mother dies. Her death closes an episode which had dogged his memory since that fateful event so many years ago.

key quote

I carry a series of images more vivid and lasting than any others of my boyhood and indelible beyond all attempts the years make to erase or fade them. (p. 11)

The significance of this quote is that it emphasises the profound effect of the events of August 1948 on David's life.

one

David recalls the Montana town of his childhood, close to the Canadian border, which: "Then, as now ... with only a few exceptions ... [was] neither large or prosperous" (p. 15). The town itself was small, with a 1948 population of less than 2000. It was hard country, but the hardest and most marginal was the Fort Warren Indian Reservation – "the rockiest, sandiest, least arable parcel of land in the region" (p. 15). David attributes the "relative tranquility of Mercer County" (p. 16) to the hard farming life and harsh climate which left "nothing ... over for raising hell or making trouble" (p. 16). Consequently, his father's job as town sheriff was a case of arresting drunks, mediating disputes and curbing high spirits in Wood's Cafe.

Wes Hayden does not fit his son's ideal of a sheriff and his wife Gail has serious reservations about her husband's ability to fulfil his potential in a job handed down to him as a result of Grandfather Hayden's power and influence. It becomes clear that Wes Hayden is caught between two powerful personalities, his father "who wanted

key passage

Significant aspects of Bantrock society and the personalities of the Hayden family members are revealed in chapter one.

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his son to continue the Hayden rule" and his wife "who wanted her husband to be merely himself and not a Hayden". David himself "wanted to grow up wild" (p. 21) and Bentrock provided the ideal setting for a boy who swam, fished and hunted. His longing for freedom from the constraints of even a small town led him to seek the solitude of Knife River where he "felt a contentment outside human society that I couldn't feel within it" (p. 24).

Marie Little Soldier was the one member of human society for whom David felt unconditional love: "Because she talked to me, cared for me ..." (p. 25). In the late summer of 1948, Marie fell ill. Gail Hayden responded with customary alarm at signs of illness and insisted on calling Dr Frank Hayden. Marie's persistent rejection of Dr Hayden became so strong that she tried to enlist David's help to persuade his parents that she was feeling better. When Gail prevailed upon Wes to ring his brother, David tried to intervene only to be dismissed by his father and forced to face up to his father's "low regard" for Indian people. When Uncle Frank arrives, David is once again confronted by the differences between the Hayden brothers. As Dr Frank goes into Marie's room, shutting the door behind him, she screams for Gail to be present yet, even with Gail in the room, Marie continues to object. He returns to the porch showing signs of discomfort, "tugging at his white shirt the way men do when their clothes are sticking to them from perspiration" (p. 41). Despite this, he dismisses Wes's questions about Marie's response by ridiculing Indian custom:

They're used to being treated by the medicine man. Or some old squaw. But a doctor comes around and they think he's the evil spirit or something. (p. 42)

As Frank leaves, David notices his mother's repressed anger, recognising her suspicion of Frank and her choice of Dr Snow as her own doctor. David the adult recognises that, had he not overheard the next part of a conversation between his parents, at this point, he would probably never have realised the reasons for the divisions which were about to open in both his family and community. But, as he listens to Gail confide what she knows about Frank's behaviour to her husband, David realises that things can never be the same again. Most significantly, he sees that his own attitudes will change towards his mother, his father and his admired Uncle Frank.

key passage

David, as adult narrator, realises how crucial his eavesdropping became in terms of his family relationships.

After Wes and Gail talk to Marie and emerge from her room "grim-faced and silent" (p. 50), Wes goes next door to speak to his deputy, Len McAuley. This is significant at this stage because it indicates that, while he accepts Marie's story, his acceptance is solely on the basis of his position as sheriff.

Meanwhile, Daisy McAuley confirms Marie's accusations to Gail and in so doing, reveals her own attitude in the whispered "Just the squaws thought" (p. 51). When Wes returns, both Gail and David see him in a new light:

... he was a brother ... to a man who used his profession to take advantage of women, brother to a pervert! (p. 52)

David identifies his parents' separate reactions, his father's need for proof, his mother's reliance on instincts. The boy tries to conceal his knowledge, recognising that "I wasn't supposed to know what they were talking about" (p. 54). It is clear that he realises his father knowing his brother as he does, is convinced in his own heart that Marie is telling the truth.

key quotes

If I had gone back into the house ... I would never have heard the conversation between my father and mother, and perhaps I would have lived out my life with an illusion about my family and perhaps even the human community ... (pp. 44-45)

This is important because it highlights both David's curiosity, the need to know the truth and his subsequent awareness that being born a Hayden in Bentrock conveyed privileges denied to other citizens.

I was beginning already to think of Uncle Frank as a criminal ... Charming, affable Uncle Frank was gone for good. (p. 49)

David's former hero-worship of Uncle Frank (often at his father's expense) is ended by the knowledge of his crimes against Indian women.

... my father knew he was guilty. (p. 54)

Gail's questions to her husband after Marie's protests against seeing Dr Frank reveal to David that his father knows his brother so well that he cannot doubt Marie's story.

TWO

David's father begins his investigation by driving to the reservation. He makes reconciliatory overtures to Gail and later speaks to Ollie Young Bear, the highly respected war hero and sportsman.

key passage
David continually refers to his need to be included in his parents' discussions.

After unsuccessfully trying to learn what his father is talking to Ollie Young Bear about, David returns home to an unusually silent house. He turns on the radio to Marie's favourite Big Band station and hopes this will make her feel better. As an adult recalling the events which followed, David associates that music with Marie:

... When I hear even a few bars of that music – "String of Pearls", "Tuxedo Junction", "Satin Doll" – I think of Marie. (p. 62)

Later that evening, Gail and David are asked to go for a walk while Wes speaks to Marie. Wes's refusal to allow Gail to be present indicates that this is official business.

When they are outside, David is unable to ask his mother to confirm what he already knows through eavesdropping but finally plucks up courage and asks her, only to have Gail evade his questions.

On the following Sunday when the family goes out to the grandparents' ranch, David is aware that his parents are tense. Wes dispels the mood by the time they arrive, although Gail is still unenthusiastic about sharing a table with Frank Hayden. Through Julian Hayden's crass reference to his wish for more grandchildren: "We want them white" (p. 72) it becomes clear to Gail and Wes (and the eavesdropping David) that Frank's relations with Indian women are well known. David himself then recalls that he has previously heard his grandfather refer to the subject after Frank and Gloria's wedding:

Now he's got himself a good-looking white woman for a wife. That better keep him off the reservation. (p. 76)

After dinner, when David asks for permission to go riding, his parents readily agree and his grandfather sends him off with an automatic pistol. After firing away wildly for a while, David shoots a magpie and experiences a strange sensation of release. On his way back to the ranch he sees his father and Uncle Frank arguing but they eventually walk off together after shaking hands.

In the car on the way home Wes tells Gail that "the problem's been taken care of" (p. 85). She is not convinced and wants to know how "what's already been done" can be redressed. Wes insists that Frank's

key passage
The funeral director is one Benbrook citizen who protects the Hayden family reputation through his silence.

punishment will come "in the hereafter" (p. 85) and that he will do nothing. When they arrive home Marie insists she is feeling better but the next day David's mother returns home from work to find Marie "lying dead in her bed" (p. 86).

When David returns less than an hour later, the funeral director has already removed Marie's body. David realises immediately what has happened when he sees the funeral home's station wagon backing out of their driveway. Although he feels as though he could run from the house, the death, "the truth of what had happened" (p. 87), he walks into the kitchen to find his mother distracted, his father on the telephone and his Uncle Frank completing a form. His memory of the doctor's medical bag is charged with symbolism:

... seeing it there where we ate our meals I realized how large it was, how if its black mouth opened, it could swallow all the light in the room. (p. 87)

Frank coolly explains to the neighbour Daisy that Marie had suffered a sudden relapse. David feels burdened by his knowledge and regrets that he cannot leave his mother and confide in his father as he drives out to the reservation with news of Marie's death. Banished by Daisy to her own house next door, David feels trapped by Len who quotes Julian Hayden's definition of a law officer as one who knows "when to look and when to look away". Len believes "Your dad hasn't quite got the hang of it" (p. 93). David feels that Len knows what he knows but loses his nerve just before confiding in the older man.

Unable to sleep that night, David goes to his parents' room and confides to his father that he had seen his Uncle Frank at their house earlier that day. His father tries to cover for his brother while his mother pleads for him to believe David. Still Wes continues his questioning until David says:

I didn't tell anyone, but ... Maybe Len saw him. (p. 99)

Wes's agitated reaction emphasises his dilemma at this stage:

If Len knows, he'll keep his mouth shut if I ask him. Or if Dad asks him, but he'll know. There he'll be, day after day, with that look I'm not going to live with that look. (p. 100)

Wes asks his son why he had not told him earlier about seeing his uncle but David is unable to answer. The boy goes to bed and spends his night in a half-sleeping, half-waking state imagining all the Indians of Bentrock gathered on the hill known as Circle Hill, mourning Marie.

key quotes

... I knew that as long as this business was going on with his brother, my father had no use for a son. (pp. 60-61)

This is a clear example of how David feels excluded from the events surrounding Marie's accusations against Frank Hayden.

I wanted to be included, to know more than what my eavesdropping brought me ... (pp. 63-64)

Following on from the above, David not only wants to know but also wants to be told by his parents, rather than learn by eavesdropping.

The events, the discoveries, the secrets of the past few days – Marie's illness, Uncle Frank's sins, the tension between my father and mother – had excited something in me that wasn't released until I shot a magpie out of a piñon pine. (pp. 81-82)

David's complex feelings are revealed. He believes this is when he realised that even "a good heart" can harbour strange and conflicting emotions.

For an instant something parted, as if the wind blew a curtain open and allowed a flash of sunlight into the room. Did Len know what I knew? (p. 94)

When David is sent to the McAuley's house after Marie's death, he suspects that Len knows more than he is prepared to tell.

Objects of the most patronizing and debilitating prejudice, the Indians in and around our community were nonetheless a largely passive and benign presence. (p. 101)

David's adult self seems to be making this assessment of a people who had lost hope.

key passage

The confrontation between Julian and Wes Hayden reveals the pressure under which Wes Hayden is placed in his role as sheriff.

three

After Marie's death, Wes immerses himself in investigations. Initially, he follows his usual pattern of chatting and socialising with the community:

... building a case ... by gathering in friends and favors. (p. 106)

Eventually Wes brings Frank to the house and locks him in the basement. David thinks at first that his father has killed his brother but when Gail returns, Wes tells them both that he has arrested Frank. Gail is incredulous – "You've turned my laundry room into a jail!" (p. 110) but Wes explains that Frank "didn't want to be locked up in the jail" (p. 111).

That evening, David's grandparents come to the door "dressed as though they had just come from church" (p. 114). Julian's blustering demand to see Frank is countered by Wes pointing out that the matter is a legal rather than family concern. David is sent to his room but listens to the conversation through a central heating grille. Julian contemptuously rejects Wes's explanation for Frank's arrest. After Gail takes Enid Hayden to the kitchen, Julian accuses Wes of jealousy, of wanting to get even with his brother, "a war hero". Hayden, senior, dismisses the accusation of sexual assault against Indian women: "You don't lock a man up for that", but his blustering is halted when Wes shouts twice the single word "Murder!" (p. 120). The two women rush back into the room and David, alone in his bedroom, is aware that his Uncle Frank must have heard the shout in his laundry prison. Enid Hayden pleads with Wes but Julian insists "We're not going to beg him" (p. 122) and they leave the house.

As David returns to the kitchen and sees that his father has been crying, he recognises for the first time that his father is mortal. Before he goes to bed, his father tells him not to let Julian Hayden into the house when there is no one else home.

As David tries to sleep that night, he cries for his horse Nutty, because he believes he will never see him again:

Now the distance between us seemed too great for either Nutty or me to travel ever again. (p. 125)

This symbolic recognition of the rift in the family signals the irreparable damage that the events of the past few days have wrought on the wider Hayden family.

The next day, as David walks down the street, he believes that people watching him and his family are "peering out and seeing a Hayden and thinking not of power, wealth and the rule of law, but of perversion, scandal, family division, and decay" (p. 127).

David's shame increases as he meets women and girls and wonders whether Frank has abused them. His anguish deepens when he realises his suspicion that his Uncle may have abused Loretta Waterman "did not disgust and anger me as it had with Miss Schott, but stirred me sexually" (p. 129). Yet again, David is forced to confront feelings within himself which confuse and disturb him. He covers his confusion when he returns home by complaining to his mother that, despite his father being in the right "we're the ones getting the shitty end of the stick" (p. 130).

Gail stays home with David and when they see the truck from the ranch circling the house, David rings his father's office and Gail loads the shotgun. As David leaves to find his father, Gail raises the shotgun and prepares to challenge the men from the ranch. Unable to find his father, David returns to the house; meanwhile, Gail has fired a warning shot. Before Gail has to make a decision about whether to fire at the men, Len McAuley appears behind them and orders them to leave. Wes returns and informs Gail, David and Len that Frank will be charged with sexual assault, there being no chance of successfully prosecuting for Marie's murder. Wes seems to apologise to his wife and son for the predicament he has created by holding Frank in the cellar. Gail points out that the easiest way of dealing with the situation is to let Frank go:

Then I won't have to walk around my own house thinking I hear him breathing down there ... worry about him breaking out ... (p. 143)

Len agrees with Gail, pointing out that even a lesser charge will be difficult to sustain, given Julian Hayden's power and influence. It becomes clear that Julian has tried to enlist Len to free Frank, and Wes realises at this point that he cannot win.

Len leaves and Gail and David wait for Wes to bring his brother back, but he returns alone with the news that Frank has confessed:

He's guilty as sin, Gail. He told me as much ... Maybe a jury will cut him loose ... By God, I won't (p. 149)

Wes's anguished appeal to Gail evokes her gentle response that "We understand, Wesley" (p. 150) but David sees that his father's suffering

key passage

At this point it becomes clear that, for Wes, justice has won over loyalty to his brother.

key passage

David highlights the extent to which the mundane (i.e. scents) can evoke important events for many years into the future.

cannot be alleviated by anyone and, as he leaves the house on a contrived errand, he realises how separate and alone each of them is in grief.

The breaking of glass during the night wakes David who finds his parents' bed empty already and the two of them sitting downstairs on the couch looking "frightened and tired, like children who have been awakened during the night for an emergency" (pp. 152–153). They all realise that Frank is smashing the jars of preserves in the cellar. Wes gently steers David back to bed with the promise that "when you wake up the worst of this will all be over" (p. 154). Next morning, David finds his father preparing to take Frank over to the jail and when he tries to sympathise, Wes replies:

David, I believe that in this world people must pay for their crimes. It doesn't matter who you are or who your relations are, if you do wrong, you pay. I believe that. I have to. (p. 156)

Yet Wes is full of regret and reminisces to David about Frank defending him as a child. Eventually, Wes takes a cup of coffee down to the basement but David hears a cry almost immediately:

... what I heard signalled such a breach in our lives, a chasm permanently dividing what we were from what we could never be again ... (p. 159)

As David rushes down the stairs in answer to his father's cry, the smell of pickles is embedded in his mind, a smell which will evoke this day for him for the rest of his life. Frank has slashed his wrists and David is aware that "Uncle Frank's suicide had solved all our problems" (p. 161). As he takes his time to compose himself before he breaks the news to his mother, David is grateful to his uncle and experiences another emotion which he now believes "was very close to love" (p. 162).

key quotes

What he seemed intent on doing ... was getting people to be on his side. (p. 106)

This is how David assesses Wes's method of gathering evidence to build a case against Frank.

... I could tell that he was making a long journey while he stood in our kitchen. (p. 108)

This quote emphasises the emotional cost to Wesley of pursuing justice against his brother.

"You – investigating?" In those two words I heard how little respect my grandfather had for my father ... (p. 118)

Julian Hayden's contempt for his younger son is typified by this scathing attack.

That night I cried for the first time since that whole sad, sordid, tragic set of events began. (p. 125)

The significance of this reflection is that the adult narrator can recall the child David's feelings of hurt and loss.

Then being a Hayden would mean having an identity I didn't want but could do nothing to disown or deny (p. 127)

David realises that his Hayden heritage means shame and public exposure of the family as a whole if Frank's crimes become general knowledge.

... I felt, standing on our lawn, as if I had just returned from a strange, hostile country where there was neither sunlight nor soft grass. (p. 139)

After Julian Hayden's henchmen leave after trying to free Frank, David realises that he has glimpsed the dark side of human nature.

"I tell you, if you could hear him talk. As if he had no more concern for what he did than if ... if he had kicked a dog. No. He'd show more remorse over a dog". (p. 150)

Wesley's decision to prosecute Frank, against all the odds and in spite of his own misgivings, is taken after he realises his brother is not the least remorseful for Marie's death.

This was the day he would put his only brother in jail. There would never be another day like it in his life. (p. 155)

David's recognition of his father's situation shows that, by this stage, they have become closer.

key passage

The nature of David's distance from his parents has changed from resentment at perceived exclusion to sympathy for their plight.

epilogue

David recalls the family's departure from Bentrock after his mother felt unable to continue living in the town "with the lies concocted in the aftermath of Frank's death" (p. 165). The pretence that Frank died in a household accident, the concealment of his crimes, the eulogising at the funeral proved too difficult for Gail to live with, unlike her pragmatic husband who rationalised:

Frank was never convicted of anything; there was no sense clouding the air with accusations. (p. 166)

Ostracised by the rest of the clan, Gail, Wes and David moved to Fargo, North Dakota. As David stood looking for the last time at the house he had grown up in, he felt a sense of distance from "those two hapless, forlorn people," his parents.

His apprehension about the future at this point was unfounded: David's subsequent life in Fargo "was not a bad life at all" (p. 169).

Wes became a lawyer, fulfilling Gail's dream, but David declined to follow his father and instead became a history teacher. The only member of the Hayden family to maintain contact was Grandma Hayden, who wrote, visited and kept them up to date with family news. They learned of Gloria's remarriage, Len's stroke and Grandfather Hayden's death and David wondered if these deaths were the result of "keeping the secret about my uncle Frank" (p. 171). He also wondered if Wes's cancer resulted from keeping the secret and his own bitterness. However, his later explanation is more down-to-earth:

Len McAuley's whiskey, my grandfather's cigars, and my father's diet. (p. 171)

As his account draws to a close, David recalls his happiest moment with Marie, playing football in their backyard at Bentrock. David also reveals how he had not told his wife, Betsy, about the events which led to leaving Bentrock until she suggested a nostalgic visit. When she questioned Gail and Wes about the "Wild West", Wes reacted by thumping the table and yelling that they must never blame Montana. David recalls how, when he returned to the dining room later:

For an instant I thought I felt the wood still vibrating from my father's blow. (p. 175)

key quotes

If there was any sense, any purpose at all in Uncle Frank's suicide, if he killed himself for any reason, it was so these people – his wife, his parents, his brother, his sister-in-law – could be reunited after his death. (p. 167)

David cannot accept that his mother and father are shunned by the rest of the family at Frank's funeral.

My parents said their goodbyes ... [but] the number of people seemed so small that it diminished my parents' years in Bentrock, as if their time there hadn't really amounted to much at all. (p. 168)

... how it could be that those two people who only wanted to do right ... were now dispossessed. (p. 169)

These two quotes demonstrate David's sadness and anger that his blameless parents should feel forced to leave Bentrock.

... after what I observed as a child in Bentrock, I could never believe in the rule of law again. (p. 170)

This exemplifies David's cynicism about how the law operates and how justice can be corrupted by power.

I believe I remembered that incident so fondly not only because I was with Marie and Ronnie ... because I felt ... as though I was part of a family, a family that accepted me for myself and not my blood or birthright. (p. 173)

David recalls a golden time with Marie and Ronnie and the pure pleasure he derived from being loved for himself.

focus questions

- The novel begins with a prologue which summarises the images recalled by the narrator from the summer of August 1948. The novel ends with a striking image of Wes Hayden striking the table to emphasise his defence of his home state. Are equally powerful images to be found elsewhere in the novel?
- The homecoming picnic for Bentrock's war veterans is strongly slanted towards Frank Hayden's achievements. Why is this? What insights does this occasion give into the nature of Bentrock society?